

The Merry Widow

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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CHAPTER III.

The Garden Fete.

THE gardens of Mme. Sonia Sadowna's villa, just outside Paris, were gayly decorated for a lawn fete. The grounds were dotted with laughing groups of brightly dressed men and women, for Sonia had particularly requested that all her Marsovia guests wear their picturesque native costume, and the result was a veritable kaleidoscope carnival of color, a perfect riot of gorgeous hues and striking figures.



ALL HER MARSOVIAN GUESTS WORE THEIR PICTURESQUE NATIVE COSTUMES.

Ambassador Popoff, his long, lean figure draped in vivid green, was picking the alleys of the garden near the entrance gate, pausing nervously now and again to scan late arrivals in search of some one. At length he descried the man he sought. Nish was just bustling into the grounds, and the ambassador at once beckoned to him.

"Now, then, Mr. Nish," cried Popoff as soon as the little clerk had shambled within earshot, "I told you to bring Prince Danilo here and not to leave him for an instant until—"

"He wouldn't let me stay," explained Nish. "He says he won't come. He's giving a party—if I may say so, a very gay."

"And for the sake of a lot of pleasure seeking idlers the prince refuses to obey my orders and come to Mme. Sonia's?"

"Yes, your excellency. He positively refuses to come. And when I say 'positively' refuses I— Here he is now!"

Danilo, resplendent in the uniform of a Marsovia captain of hussars, strolled nonchalantly forward, with a careless nod that quite ignored the ambassador's glare of reproof at his lateness.

"I understand, prince," began Popoff coldly, "that you positively refused to obey my—"

"So I did, so I did," assented Danilo cheerfully. "But at the last moment I changed my mind and my clothes, and here I am. I've postponed my party for an hour or so. You see, I remembered my promise to help you scold away from the widow any Frenchman who seemed inclined to make love to her. That's why I came."

"Good!" approved Popoff, rubbing his hands gleefully. "Very good! And where do you expect to begin?"

"With the most dangerous woman. Who is he?"

"Well," replied Popoff confidentially,

Nish, "I happen to know M. de Jolidon is already head over heels in love with a lady who has a husband. He—"

"Mr. Nish," thundered Popoff, "you are demeaning yourself to the contemptible act of talking scandal! Are you aware of that, Mr. Nish? If so, go on talking it and tell me who she is."

"You fool!" whispered Danilo in Nish's ear. "Everybody but the ambassador himself knows it is Mme. Popoff whom De Jolidon loves. Be careful!"

"Well, Mr. Nish," repeated Popoff majestically as he eyed the squirming clerk with lofty majesty, "I'm waiting to hear the name of the lady that De Jolidon is in love with."

"He neglected to tell me, your excellency," spluttered Nish.

"Then," decided the ambassador, "I shall discover her by diplomatic means, and when I find who she is she shall use her influence to lure De Jolidon away from the widow. Prince, will you help me in this?"

"Leave it all to me," suggested Danilo, with startling willingness. "Don't try to learn her identity yourself. Let me attend to the whole matter."

"All right," consented Popoff. "It will be a good lesson in diplomacy for you. Perhaps I can put you on the right track."

The ambassador drew an ivory fan from his pocket.

"Last night at the embassy ball," said he, "Mme. Kovitch, who used to be one of my attaches, brought me this. He was crazy with jealousy. He'd just picked up the fan; said it was his wife's and that some man had written 'I love you' on one of the sticks. He was going home to beat his wife and make her confess who the villain was when I persuaded my wife to save poor Mme. Nova Kovitch by pretending the fan was her own. Ah,

but my wife is a born diplomatist! Nova Kovitch was convinced, and I pocketed the fan for future reference."

Danilo took the trinket from Popoff's hands and read the penciled inscription.

"Why," he said on impulse, "this is De Jolidon's handwriting! How does it happen that he—"

"Then," squealed Popoff in triumph, "it is Mme. Nova Kovitch he loves. The whole thing is absurdly simple when a brain like mine is brought to bear on it!"

Delighted with his own astuteness, the ambassador pattered off to join the other guests, leaving Danilo, fan in hand, blankly facing the astounded little clerk.

"Then," observed the prince, "do you suppose it's possible De Jolidon can be in love with Mme. Nova Kovitch as well as with Mme. Popoff?"

"I'd like to think so," murmured Nish as he started faithfully off in the wake of his chief. "I'd like to think so. It would make it less exclusive, less of a monopoly. And to think his excellency never recognized his own wife's fan! Where ignorance is bliss why read up on divorce laws?"

Laying the fan on a nearby table, Danilo was turning away when a voice behind him called mockingly:

"Still in retreat? So you are afraid of me!"

Whirling about, the prince faced Sonia. She was bewitchingly pretty in the black and gold Marsovia dress that showed to fullest advantage every willowy line of her figure.

"I'm not retreating," he contradicted.

temptation of the little building's architecture.

The neglected fan lying on the table caught Sonia's eye. She picked it up idly and opened it. The words "I love you" met her gaze. Quickly she glanced at Danilo.

"I understand," she murmured to herself. "He vowed he'd never say it to me, so he's written it."

Noting that Danilo's back was toward her, she furtively lifted the fan to her lips and kissed the written words. Then as she restored it to the table she whispered:

"Just the same, I'll make him say it. He shall!"

She crossed to where he stood.

"Have you nothing to say to me, prince?" she asked.

"Only one thing—goodbye!"

"Goodbye!" she echoed. "You're not going?"

"I leave Paris tomorrow morning—by the first train—forever!"

"Then you won't be here, after all, to dance at my wedding?"

"No!"

"But you promised. And now, I suppose, I shall never see you again, for when I'm married I shall live in Paris."

"I thought you were more patriotic," he sighed. "It seems hard that you should turn your back on your native land, marry a Frenchman and settle here."

"Yet it is what I have decided," she answered. "This is probably the last time I shall wear our native costume or dance our wild national dances. Today's fete is a sort of farewell to old times."

"No; our dances and costumes would not appeal to a Frenchman. Who is it you are going to marry?"

"The engagement isn't announced yet," she evaded.

"Then," he returned, with a shrug, "I suppose I shall never know, for I leave early tomorrow."

"And you won't dance at my wedding?"

"I've told you I would not."

"If you won't," she cried, a sudden inspiration flashing through her mind and lighting her pale face to dazzling beauty, "dance with me now!"

She stretched out her slender white arms with an allurements that no mortal man could resist.



(To be continued.)

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